

PARENT PERSPECTIVES: WHY SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED'S 2024 SCHOOL CLOSURE PLAN FAILED

**A summary of qualitative data gathered in
parent feedback sessions during and after
San Francisco Unified School District's plan to
close 11 schools failed in October 2024**

PREPARED BY



**SAN FRANCISCO
PARENT COALITION**

www.sfparents.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco Unified School District's (SFUSD) Fall 2024 school closure plan was intended to be an equitable, community-driven process aimed at addressing declining enrollment and budget deficits. However, despite initial efforts, the plan collapsed almost immediately due to significant implementation failures, lack of transparency, and widespread parent and community distrust. This report summarizes qualitative feedback from impacted families, revealing key shortcomings and opportunities for a family-led process, should SFUSD ever revisit school closures in the future.

KEY PARENT CONCERNS

- 1. Flawed Data and Lack of Transparency.** Parents identified serious issues with the data used to determine school closures. The methodology and criteria were inconsistent, and SFUSD did not provide clear justifications for its decisions. Data errors and last-minute changes further eroded trust in the process.
- 2. Community Non-engagement.** While SFUSD initially engaged communities in defining equity criteria, direct engagement with affected schools was lacking. Parents and school staff reported feeling unheard, and public forums often lacked meaningful two-way dialogue. Opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving were missed.
- 3. Ineffective Communication.** Reliance on mass emails and inconsistent messaging contributed to confusion. Critical information was leaked to the media before being officially communicated to families, further undermining trust. Translation services were provided but did not address broader accessibility concerns.
- 4. Poor Timing.** The decision to announce school closures at the start of the academic year (as opposed to later in the school year) disrupted students, families, and staff still with an entire school year ahead of them. The uncertainty surrounding closures lingered for months, impacting teacher morale, school community morale, and enrollment efforts.
- 5. Broken Promises.** The District did not demonstrate how closures would lead to “fewer, better schools.” Parents were not convinced their children would receive improved resources or opportunities if they were moved to another school. The District struggled to articulate financial savings and did not adequately plan for the transitions.

SOLUTIONS TO BUILD TRUST AHEAD OF FUTURE BUDGET CUTS

- 1. Families Must Be Involved in the Process.** Instead of imposing decisions, SFUSD should collaborate with parents and teachers to develop solutions that consider student well-being, logistics, and school community preservation.
- 2. Prioritize Student Learning.** Any future plan for deep cuts or potential closures should include detailed strategies to support academic continuity, tracking each student's learning milestones, and adding learning supports to offset negative impacts, particularly for marginalized students.
- 3. Develop a Clear Narrative.** SFUSD must convincingly articulate the rationale for closures, ensuring decisions are driven by both financial sustainability and improved student outcomes.
- 4. Commit to Better Schools.** Parents need clear evidence that school closures and deep cuts will improve educational opportunities, resources, and overall student success.
- 5. Balance Data with Human Judgment.** While data analytics play a role, decision-making must incorporate qualitative factors, community context, and local needs.

THE PATH FORWARD

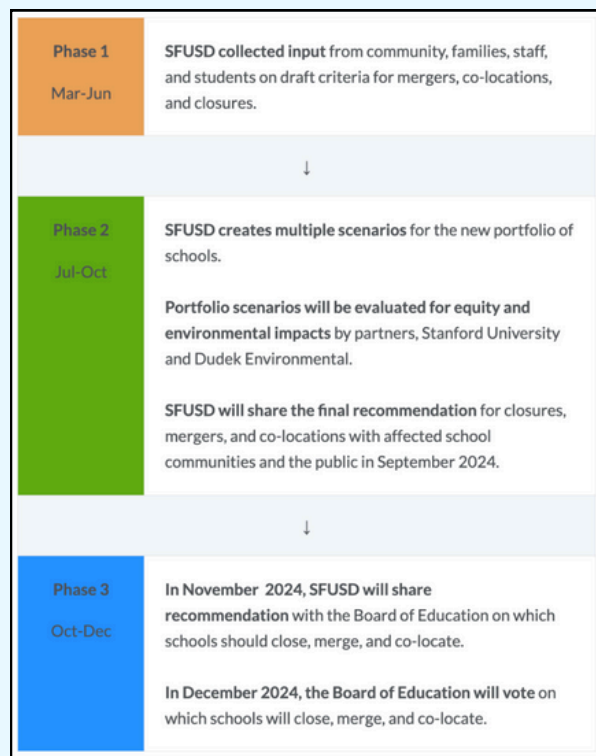
School closures, if revisited by SFUSD in the future, must be handled with greater transparency, real two-way engagement with families, and a commitment to student success. During the next few years of the District's process to restructure its budget in order to regain fiscal solvency and avoid state takeover, SFUSD has an opportunity to rebuild trust with parents by putting them in the driver's seat and crafting thoughtful, well-communicated plans that ensure all children receive a quality education in a supportive and stable learning environment.



INTRODUCTION

While school closures in San Francisco are off the table for now, San Francisco parents, teachers, and community members would be naive to believe they are off the table indefinitely, given the District’s growing budget deficit and the continued decline in student enrollment in districts like San Francisco and across the country. The decision to close schools, however, is a serious one. It can have negative consequences—particularly for children from low-income, marginalized backgrounds—with impacts that last a lifetime.

In this report, we share a summary of parent feedback gathered from many of the communities directly impacted by SFUSD’s Fall 2024 school closure attempt.



Above: SFUSD’s timeline for its “Resource Alignment” process

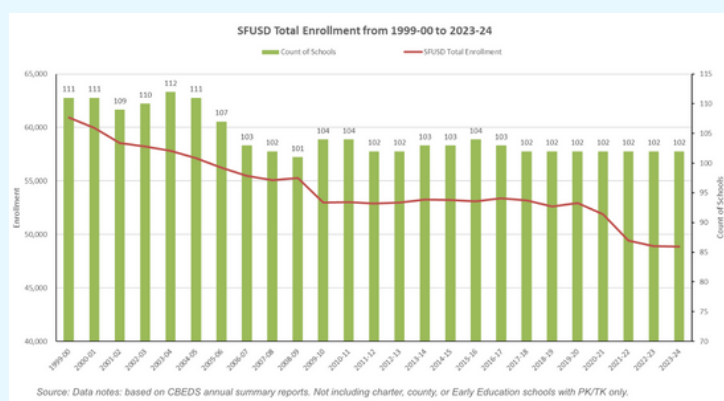
San Francisco Parent Coalition reached out to the parent communities at all of the schools slated for closure, to hear and lift up concerns. Feedback was gathered from over 200 impacted families, teachers, and principals at all 11 schools on the closures list through several methods: direct interviews with two dozen parents, teachers, and principals; three community meetings (virtual and in-person); multiple threads in our social media forum, and feedback surveys (offered in English, Chinese, and Spanish).



While SFUSD may have aimed to have a community-driven, equitable, and student-centered approach to the school closure process, what transpired fell far short of that goal.

BACKGROUND

San Francisco is not alone in its dire budget situation: school districts across the country face declining enrollment and—given how schools are funded based on enrollment—declining revenue. We’re operating the same number of schools as we were 18 years ago but with 6,000 fewer students. Our district faces a \$200 million budget deficit over the next three years, and as our California Department of Education advisors put it, “there are no easy cuts left” and “there will be no stone left unturned,” even after years of trimming here and there.



Above: from SFUSD’s presentation at Council of Great City Schools, 10/24

In Fall 2023, SFUSD partnered with Stanford University to develop and implement a new approach to the District’s school portfolio. Everything would be on the table, SFUSD said: school closures, classroom consolidations, and major program changes—for example to language programs, designed-to-be small schools, and K-8 schools.

The District and the Stanford team committed to centering equity and excellence through this work and minimizing negative impacts to communities—especially for students from historically underserved populations.

Community engagement in the 2023-24 school year was intended to be robust, with SFUSD noting on its website that its engagement efforts “**surpassed all school districts researched for best practices.**” SF Parents learned from an independent researcher, who works for the nonprofit education organization Bellwether, that SFUSD’s community engagement process was, in fact, more robust than what is typically observed in other districts across the country. Stanford researchers handled the equity scoring process, building an algorithm that would—in theory—reflect SFUSD’s and the community’s feedback in the list of schools it produced for closure. Former Board of Education Commissioner Mark Sanchez even commented in August 2024 how thoughtful the process was, particularly compared to SFUSD’s closures process 20 years ago. The initial process reflected positive intentions around centering equity, hearing from schools in all neighborhoods, and learning from past closures that disproportionately impacted marginalized communities.

However, what external researchers and local leaders see can be **very different from the parent and community experience on the ground**. For example, in one exercise, SFUSD solicited parent feedback via a survey asking parents to “allocate coins” to priority areas, but the instructions were confusing even for native English-speaking parents. Town halls were not always sharing consistent information, and at times even certain Board of Education commissioners contradicted SFUSD leadership, saying that “closures might not be necessary,” while staff were saying they absolutely were.



THE TROUBLED ROLLOUT: BROKEN PROMISES AND DISINTEGRATION OF TRUST

In the Fall of 2024, our SFUSD students and families should have been feeling securely settled into their new school year routines, planning Halloween costumes, and sharing the usual complaints about how quickly the holiday season was approaching. Instead, the looming “school closures” were the focus of most parent conversations.

Though the closure list was expected in mid-September, as per the District’s timeline, the superintendent and Board of Education suddenly postponed the release date just days before the scheduled announcement. This stirred up an already suspicious community; the District wasn’t prepared to handle this well and didn’t have a strong implementation plan ready to go. Parents and the community were already losing confidence.

As the District got closer to finally releasing the list, communications from both local media and the District made it unclear if this list was final, or if there was room for negotiating. School communities were being dropped into a “Hunger Games” playing field, with parents divided and forced into jockeying for the right for their school to remain open. SF Parents learned that this was partly due to the Board of Education’s and the City’s interference with how the closure communications would be rolled out, and even which schools would make it onto the list.

Chaos, finger-pointing, and knee-jerk reactions ensued as too many cooks in the kitchen failed to reach a consensus on a clear path forward. Concurrently, a looming citywide election likely influenced the sudden involvement of elected leaders in the process.

Families directly impacted by the District's announcement of 11 school closures were blindsided when they first read this news in Mission Local. A District Advisory Council member had leaked the information to a reporter ahead of the official release.

TOP 5 PARENT CONCERNS LEADING TO THE COLLAPSE OF SFUSD'S CLOSURE ATTEMPT

Below, we themed the qualitative feedback from parents regarding the flawed closure process and the broken trust between their communities and SFUSD.



1. FLAWED DATA AND LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

The school closure rollout process was poorly executed, particularly due to flawed data used for decision-making and the lack of transparency around the process by which SFUSD selected the schools slated for closure.

Data-savvy public school parents combed through whatever information they could find, and they uncovered inconsistencies between the initially defined criteria, later scoring, and the final list. They were surprised by the sudden appearance of enrollment as a key criteria in the end, since at the beginning of the process it was to be only 6% of the overall scoring. The equity criteria were “some of the worst and most unreliable data,” according to a parent at Yick Wo Elementary, one of the schools that had been targeted for closure. “It was unclear what was behind the criteria or [whether] the criteria were actually advancing equity,” she said.

SFUSD appeared reluctant to publish the data and data sources that drove the critical decisions they were making. More concerning, schools’ scores changed after initial publication—with huge implications for whether or not the “right” schools were chosen. A new criterion—a 260-student enrollment cap—showed up out of the blue, sometime after the Board of Education privately reviewed the initial proposed closure list from the Stanford-SFUSD team. Within days of SFUSD publishing the list, community trust was lost.

The final list also revealed that some communities were disproportionately impacted: 10 out of the 11 schools were on the eastern side of the city.

“ The data didn’t make sense. They changed our score after they published it. So, were they fudging the numbers?
- Parent, SF Community School ”

2. COMMUNITY NON-ENGAGEMENT

Whereas SFUSD offered many opportunities for districtwide community engagement in Phases One and Two of the criteria definition process (March–May 2024), they missed entirely the critical piece of engaging and creating solutions **with** parent and school communities who would be directly impacted by closures.

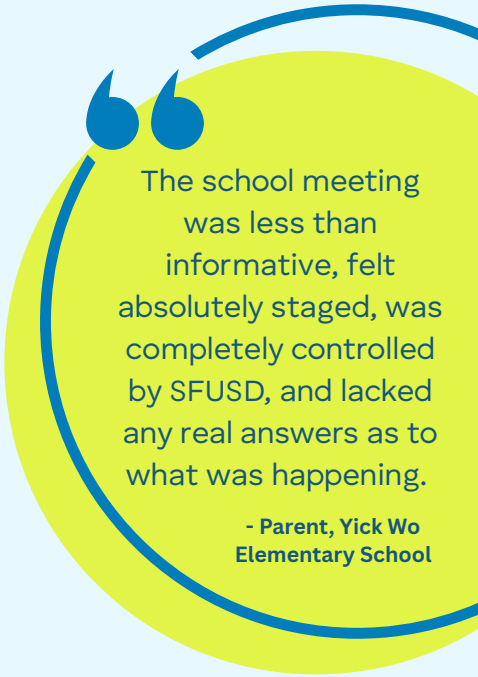
Almost immediately after the closure announcement, parents, students, and staff were already feeling neglected. Community meetings facilitated by the District lacked meaningful, two-way dialogue, and some were inaccessible due to language or location barriers. Parents had a sense that community-submitted questions were only answered by the District if it helped further their narrative, which exacerbated the growing distrust. Parents expressed frustration over missed opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Teachers described feeling “disposable,” and parents expressed concerns about the damage to the schools’ morale.

Instead of SFUSD seeking out and incorporating parent input, organizations like ours were collecting parents’ concerns and nonnegotiables and sending them to SFUSD. The District missed the opportunity to listen to and consider the most important family concerns if they were to move schools.

For example, parents shared the importance of proximity to the newly assigned school, a consistent bell schedule so families’ work schedules would not be impacted, and keeping the community of students and teachers intact as they move. SFUSD also missed the opportunity to consider what a true “merge” might look like, as opposed to a closure:

How could the “best of” two different schools be merged together into one new school?

Parents envisioned a district-supported process where school communities would work together to identify the best qualities of both schools. Instead, families and kids, and staff and teachers, were just being cut and pasted into another school.



The school meeting was less than informative, felt absolutely staged, was completely controlled by SFUSD, and lacked any real answers as to what was happening.

- Parent, Yick Wo Elementary School

3. INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Instead of focused and sensitive communications with school communities that matched the seriousness of the situation, SFUSD used mass emails, newsletters, and FAQs. These missives often included incorrect information or misdirected communications—intended for one community, but received by another.

And, while the District did a good job to ensure language translations were available for our many diverse family populations, they relied too heavily on email, as opposed to text, phone calls, or other preferred methods to reach families where they are at— such as directly engaging with parents outside of schools at drop-off or pick-up. For such life-altering changes like a child's school closing, every family should have received the news in a timely, accurate, and emotionally supportive way. Parents envisioned a district-supported process where school communities would work together to identify the best qualities of both schools. Instead, families and kids, and staff and teachers, were just being cut and pasted into another school.

Information was also leaked to local news outlets by members of the District Advisory Council, resulting in the closure list being first published by the media even before it was shared by the District. Any hope for an empathetic communications rollout—something a highly charged topic like this deserved—was immediately extinguished. Instead, mass confusion and flying rumors compounded an already stressful situation. SFUSD had not prepared or followed a solid communications strategy, which was a critical failure for such a sensitive, immense effort.

Finally, the District's Hunger Games-style approach to the list—announcing that this might not be the final list—meant that schools suddenly felt pitted against each other, fighting for their own communities to stay open, rather than promoting a feeling of “we're all in this together.”

“ They opened the meeting with “I just want to share my favorite memory of El Dorado, and then you can share yours” as though we were having some kind of memorial rather than receiving the devastating news of the dismantling of our community

- Teacher, El Dorado Elementary School

4. POOR TIMING

While there's never a **good** time for a struggling district to announce gut-wrenching closures, doing so at the beginning of the school year—when kids and teachers are just getting settled and feeling excited for the year ahead—was a very poor timing choice by SFUSD. Whereas other major districts tend to close schools much later in the school year in order to minimize disruptions to learning, SFUSD chose to let these communities sit with “closure” hanging over them for nearly an entire school year. Teachers began fearing for their jobs, parents began fighting for their schools to stay open, and during that short-lived closure rollout period, few—if any—District leaders were focused on math and reading goals for these impacted students.

Additionally, the odd timing was just weeks before the annual enrollment fair where thousands of entering families check out potential schools. Following the closure announcement, schools on the list questioned if they should invest in participating in the SFUSD enrollment fair. Parents leading school tours found numbers were down, and prospective families began asking questions about the schools' status on the closures list, not on the unique student experience that each school offers.

Even months after the failed closure process, schools continued fielding concerns from prospective parents about their schools' futures. Adding to these communities' frustrations, the District failed to communicate that the criteria used to generate the initial closures list would not be used again, or that a different process would be used in the future, if that was the case.

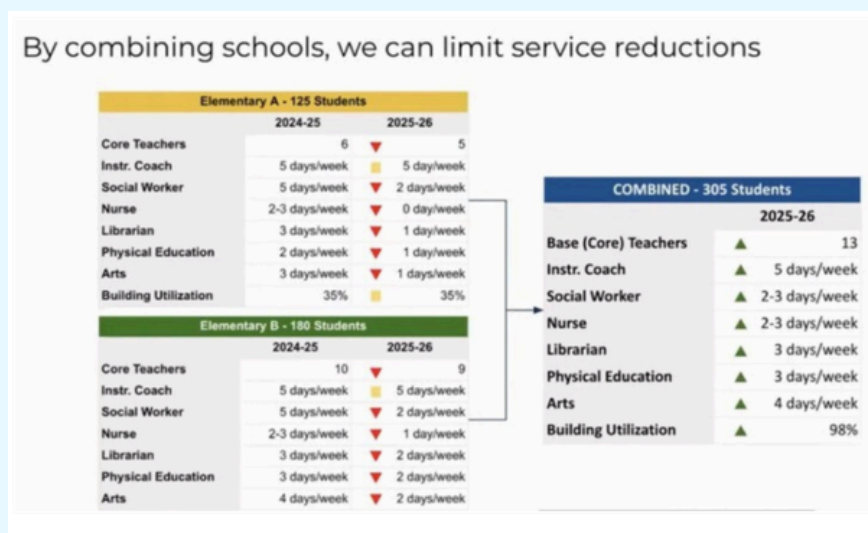


5. BROKEN PROMISES

An overarching theme we heard from parents was the lack of a clear rationale for why school closures were necessary and why their kids would be better off if their schools closed. Education policy research points to how school closures can negatively impact kids' learning, their academic outcomes, and even their future employment and earnings potential—especially for students from low-income, marginalized communities. So why would San Francisco close schools without sharing a strong rationale or assurances that kids would be better off? A couple of District presentations and letters to the community began mentioning a goal of having “fewer, better schools.” However, this thread was lost by the Fall of 2024, the picture never fully painted.

Part of the challenge was that the District could not pinpoint **if** or **how much** money it would save by going down this path. The numbers changed depending upon who you asked, or what month it was.

The District was unable to promise families that at their new school their kids would receive greater access to resources and support. At the notorious community meetings after the closure list was revealed, instead of families feeling assured their kids would be moving to a more resourced school, the story told through the presentation was: Your school currently only has a half-time social worker and a half-time nurse. After your school closes and your kid moves to a new school, they will **still** only have a half-time social worker and half-time nurse:



From an SFUSD presentation to a school community identified for potential closure, Oct 2024

This was just rubbing salt in the wound, rather than making an attractive pitch that the families could get on board with and potentially accept.

In the end, SFUSD did not sufficiently convince the community that closures were necessary, nor that kids would be better off.

A DISTRICT LEFT IN LIMBO AND PARENTS ON HIGH ALERT

Although SFUSD's school closure process was deeply flawed, it had its merits, namely, its aspirational commitment to equity in the original design and its 2023-24 community engagement intentions. Ultimately, however, the faulty data and lack of transparency, the lack of a student- and family-centric plan, and the lack of meaningful engagement and dialogue with impacted communities were all egregious errors in judgment. We wonder if applying basic intuition—rather than making this solely a numbers game by scoring schools—could have helped. For example, what about starting with children's primary concern when told their school will close? According to representatives we spoke with about Boston and Chicago's school closures, kids' first question is always: 'Will I get to stay with my friends?'

We recognize San Francisco's public schools are facing a serious fiscal cliff, and our state advisors from the California Department of Education have warned that "no stone may be left unturned." And we—parents, students, teachers, and staff—have a rightful place at the table as options are explored. If SFUSD makes another attempt at school closures, parents won't be blindsided the next time it approaches the topic.



WHAT SFUSD CAN DO DIFFERENTLY

While SFUSD initially aimed for a community-driven and equitable approach to school closures, the rollout ultimately failed because of broken promises with families. SFUSD must double down its commitment to prioritize student learning, engage families in planning processes especially when considering deep cuts to schools and communities, and provide a clear rationale for any efforts that it might consider in the future.

If the District learns anything from parent perspectives on the 2024 school closure attempt, it should be the critical need for:

BETTER PLANNING

Every decision and piece of the plan should tie back to student learning experience.

We know that school closures can have negative impacts to student learning from Day 1 of the announcement. Before SFUSD ever attempts closures again, the District must develop a robust plan for maximizing student learning as a critical part of its overall plan. It should commit to how the District will safeguard learning, track each child's academic milestones and progress, and **invest** in these students following the announcement at their current schools, and in subsequent years at their new schools.

More careful thought should be given to the timing of any announcement from a **student** perspective, along with more attention to the supports and interventions that will ensure children's learning does not slide before, during, or after a school transition. SFUSD should especially invest in schools where closures disproportionately impact students of color and underserved backgrounds.

Don't rely solely on algorithms. Human brains have a way of handling complex situations that a computer algorithm cannot. For example, closing schools that are high-demand or already successful in advancing excellence and equity in student outcomes may be a very hard sell to the community. Or closing all three schools in one neighborhood might not be the wisest move; a decision like this would especially create challenges for a neighborhood in which many families don't have cars and most walk their kids to school.

If SFUSD attempts school closures in the future, it will want to pair up the computer outputs with the human thinkers—most importantly, the families who will be impacted—the next time around.

CO-CREATION WITH FAMILIES

The District needs to put families in the driver's seat. SFUSD spent all of its efforts on pre-closure planning and equity criteria development, but little to no time on working with communities to develop transition plans outlining the details of **how** this would all work. Communication needs to be two-way, and not just to check the box of “we did XX number of engagement sessions,” but to meaningfully incorporate parent input into the planning. SFUSD should engage and collaborate with families and teachers at individual school communities around the open questions they are grappling with in order to develop appropriate solutions and effective transition plans. For example: a plan where kids stay with kids, teachers stay with kids, taking into consideration the proximity of the new schools. SFUSD needs to heed families’ nonnegotiables and work together to create plans **with** them, not **for** them. It will never work for families to receive a plan with decisions already made for them during a smoke-and-mirrors “community engagement meeting.”

COMMUNICATION AND TRUST-BUILDING

The District needs to tell a coherent story. SFUSD never had a consistent, compelling, trustworthy story. Are we saving money, or are we serving kids better? Or both? How does this tie to our vision for SFUSD and for our students? If SFUSD pursues closures again, it needs to articulate why closures would be necessary and why the schools it chooses are the right schools to close. These are real children and real teachers—not merely inanimate statistics—and the District owes them a clear story and rationale.

The District should demonstrate how impacted students will be better off. There's one thing every parent has in common, and that's wanting what's best for their kid. With deep cuts impacting many of our schools in the coming school year and beyond, it's not hard to imagine a better education could be possible for so many of our students if we just had more resources, more staff, more supports available to them. SFUSD needs to make the case to families that their kids will be better off in new, more-resourced and better-staffed schools.

WHAT FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES CAN DO

When schools close, communities fracture. Children lose trusted teachers, families lose vital support systems, and neighborhoods lose their anchors. But we cannot allow that kind of fracturing to happen here in San Francisco.

The writing is on the wall: SFUSD hints they will return to a school closure process. Next time, we demand they start with families. And families have to be ready to engage. San Francisco's public school families have demonstrated time and again that when we unite, we can create positive change for our children.

San Francisco Parent Coalition stands ready to transform this moment of budget crisis into an opportunity for real reform to our system and improvements for kids. We envision a future where:

- Every budget decision starts with "What's best for kids?"
- Family voices shape major district decisions from day one.
- Resources flow directly to classrooms and student supports.
- Our most vulnerable students receive the most protections and investments.

Take these next steps with us in demanding better for our city's children:

- 1) Sign up for our regular newsletter--which include budget action alerts--at [**www.sfparents.org**](http://www.sfparents.org) to stay informed and engaged.
- 2) Click [**here**](#) to email the Board of Education and SFUSD leadership the recommendations outlined in this report.
- 3) Help shape our advocacy by joining one of our next solutions-driven community conversations. Email us [**here**](#) to find out details for the next event.

The failed school closure process of 2024 showed us what doesn't work. Now it's time to show San Francisco what does: a united community of parents, caregivers, teachers, and community members standing up for every child's right to a stable, well-funded education. San Francisco's kids can't wait. **Take action with us today.**

SF PARENTS: *“WE GET FAMILIES HEARD”*



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